



Up & Go: A Platform for Fair Work and Liveable Wages

Highlights Up & Go is an online platform which brings together several cooperatively owned cleaning businesses for fair work conditions and liveable wages in a sector usually characterised by informal, precarious, and low-paid work. It is a *sharing economy* platform owned by its workers. Together they set prices, and 95 percent of the profits go to supporting the cooperatively owned businesses. The remaining 5 per cent is invested in Up & Go for advancing the platform's technology and providing customer service. Furthermore, through business meetings, Up & Go builds capacity, shares ideas, and delivers training to its worker-owners. During these meetings the members of the cooperative set up the rules and structures for making decisions about how to run their business, discuss their rates, and establish their standards of service.

Introduction

While the 'gig-economy', in which companies 'use technology to deliver labor to [customers]' (Smith and Leberstein 2015: 3), has brought some benefits to workers, such as flexible working hours and remote work, it remains more precarious and has fewer benefits than other types of wage employment. Workers are non-employees and therefore typically have no rights to minimum wage, overtime, compensation for injuries, protection from discrimination, nor compensation pay. These workers also do not have protection through joining unions nor do they have co-workers per se to whom they can talk and discuss issues (*ibid*). Furthermore, although workers are considered independent contractors they often lack the freedom that comes with that distinction: They are unable to set their



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own rates or working methods and are sometimes even limited to when they are allowed to work depending on demand (Smith and Leberstein 2015). Yet, despite the drawbacks to becoming a gig-economy/on-demand worker, companies that employ independent contractors continue to expand. From 2012 to 2015, for example, the number of Uber drivers doubled every six months (Hall and Krueger 2016).

Given these growth opportunities, some workers have managed to capitalise on the popularity of on-demand work and app-based technology while preserving worker's rights to fair compensation and job security. These include the worker-owners of Up & Go, a platform cooperative.

The origins of Up & Go start with the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park (CFLSP), New York in 2006. CFLSP began by helping local businesses organise themselves into cooperatives (Mancori and Vicari 2020). Cirenía Dominguez set up her own cleaning cooperative, Brightly Cleaning, in early 2017 with assistance from La Colmena community job centre and CFLSP. Then in May 2017, Brightly Cleaning and two other female-owned cooperative cleaning businesses, Cooperative Cleaning of New York and Ecomundo Cleaning Worker Cooperative, came together to form Up & Go, an online booking service for cleaners, using similar systems to other sharing economy platforms (Rosenblum 2017). However, Up & Go is different from other *gig-economy* set ups in that the people who provide the service, i.e. clean the houses, are also the people who own the platform and the businesses, cutting out extortive middle managers. Today, four different majority-women and minority-owned cleaning cooperatives contribute to Up & Go: Brightly Cleaning Port Richmond, Brightly Cleaning Carroll Gardens, Brightly Cleaning East Harlem and Apple Eco Cleaning Co-op.

Timeline

2006	2012 - 2015	2015	2017	May 2017	Nov 2019
Center for Family Life in Sunset Park begins to help local businesses organise cooperatives	Number of Uber drivers doubles every six months	Cooperative Cleaning of New York launches	Brightly Cleaning established	UP & Go launches publicly	Sunset Park/ Up & Go are regional winners of MIT inclusive innovation challenge

How It Works

With funding and support from the Robin Hood Foundation, Barclays and the CFLSP, the Up & Go website was developed by CoLab Cooperative with guidance from Cornell Tech. The website aimed to take advantage of what gig-economy apps offer: a digital presence, online payments and easy scheduling tools. The website functions to match customers (individuals who want their home cleaned) to service providers (cleaners) based on the needs of the customer and the capacity of the worker. First time customers specify preferred time and date of service, the size of their home, whether they have pets, whether they will provide their own cleaning products and appliances, and any other customised instructions, such as fridge cleaning or laundry. Worker owners of Up & Go then receive this information as well as an estimated payment before they accept or decline a job (Rosenblum 2017).

Enabling Participation

Up & Go IP rights (the platform) and brand are co-owned and managed by its workers. Profits derived from the services remain with the workers: 95 per cent of the cleaning fee is given to the worker who performed the job and only 5 per cent goes to maintaining the platform (Up & Go 2019). Not only do workers maintain the bulk of Up & Go's profits, they also collectively

negotiate and decide pricing for the entire business (MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy 2019). One worker stated that ‘the worker-owner arrangement has given her and her colleagues more control over the business and more equity in the operation’ (Rosenblum 2017: np).

While the website helps the cooperatives attract and maintain new business, the platform also functions to bring members of different cooperatives together to exchange ideas, knowledge and learning (Murphy 2017). Up & Go holds monthly meetings for its worker owners where they can discuss any issues (Thompson 2019). Through the platform cooperative, worker-owners vote on major decisions, such as cancellation policies and pricing (Coca 2017; Hayes 2019).

Up & Go maintains collaboration and cooperation at its centre. Unlike other service apps, customers cannot rate individual workers. They can still leave comments, but no individual is singled out.

Outcomes

Nationally, home care workers and cleaners are some of the lowest paid workers, but in 2017, Up & Go workers received an average of US\$22.25 per hour compared to a New York City average of US\$17.27 and earned US\$4-5 more per hour than an average cleaner working in the same area (Rosenblum 2017).

In addition, Up & Go allows workers to compete competitively with large businesses. The general manager of Cooperative Cleaning of New York, Mariana Ortega, said ‘We can’t compete, not individually, and Up & Go brings us all to that ability and level to do that. It’s a stepping-stone’ (Rosenblum 2017: np). Furthermore, workers are better informed of their rights and can avoid exploitative work environments (Mancori and Vicari 2020). Also, in 2019, the CFLSP was the Financial Inclusion Regional Winner of the MIT Inclusive Innovation Challenge (MIT Inclusive Innovation Challenge 2019).

However, platform cooperatives like Up & Go are not without their challenges as investors are reluctant or unwilling to lend money to a business that won’t be sold on for a profit.

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Image: Up & Go Cooperative worker-owners

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